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ABSTRACT

The role of language and intercultural communication in technical assistance projects in developing nations is discussed. An introductory section offers background on the emergence of the communication issue in technical aid projects. Two subsequent sections look separately at the issues of meeting information needs and of meeting language needs. Communication is seen as a key factor in aid project design because of the need for management information systems, need for access to information, emergence of the global computer network, and rapid growth of an information base in human resource development. The current level of investment in information dissemination in this context is seen as poor. Language issues discussed include those of language choice for project implementation and documentation and the literacy needs of populations served through the projects. The final section proposes language and information audits as an element in project planning and implementation, and examines the implications for related training. Topics for further discussion and a brief bibliography are included. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATION AS A CROSS-CUTTING ISSUE IN PROJECT DESIGN - LANGUAGE AND INFORMATION COMPONENTS

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Abstract :- *This paper demonstrates the importance and inter-relatedness of language and information issues in the planning and implementation of all aid projects. It deals with such issues as the Internet, the North/South information gap, language choice and equity in language and information provision. The paper ends with suggestions as to how donor thinking may develop or be developed to enhance language and information project provision.*

1. Preliminaries

At the first International Conference on Language in Development the British Council made a presentation on Language as a Cross Cutting Issue and at this, the second conference, we will extend this concept to encompass the interrelationship between language and information as vital components of the communication process in projects. This attempt to demonstrate this interrelationship is the result not only of a desire to show how we believe projects should be conducted effectively but is also a reflection of the close working relationship that exists between the Language and Development team and the Information team within the British Council in Manchester and, worldwide, between the Council's English Language work and Information work.

The concept of a "cross-cutting" issue is one of particular concern to the United Kingdom's Overseas Development Agency, the organisation which is currently the British Council's primary source of development project activity. A cross-cutting issue is one that the ODA regards as being of such central importance to its mission that the ODA plans that all of its projects should impact on each of the cross-cutting issues which exercise it at any one time. Such issues are currently described under "Development Priority" areas such as Human Development, Economic Liberalisation, Enhancing Productive Capacity, Poverty Alleviation, the Environment, Children by Choice, and Good Government. The intention of this paper is to elaborate the message of last year's British Council paper to this conference, that language should also be considered as a cross-cutting issue and to add to that elaboration the contention that information and language are inextricably linked and that information must be considered alongside language in the planning and implementation of all successful projects. In order to demonstrate the way in which language requires

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information content to make it meaningful and the way in which information requires a language in which it can be understood by people, the next two sections of this paper are divided into two parts, the first emphasising the need for consideration of information issues and the second emphasising the need for consideration of language issues. Then follows a section on the value of language and information "Audits" and related training needs and the paper ends with a request for audience discussion of topic areas which seem to us to be of particular importance.

2. Information

The inextricably linked concepts of language and information are often considered within the concept of "communication", a well-trodden topic in the philosophies of management studies and project management. It is well recognised in these topic areas that for a project to succeed, all parties who participate in or are affected by it, whether the donor, the project manager, the field manager, the clients, the host government officials or the direct project beneficiaries, all need to understand its purpose and value. This can only be achieved if these parties have an adequate understanding of the purpose of the project and their role in it. Such an understanding can only be achieved if all relevant parties have access to sufficient pertinent information and if that information is stored or transmitted in a form that is intelligible and accessible to participants. Effective communication is therefore a prerequisite for successful project implementation and a failure to invest in communication can mean that there are misunderstandings and failures at critical stages of project implementation. However, we feel that it is too often assumed by donors and recipient governments or organisations that investment in communication is unnecessary or can somehow take care of itself. Sadly, the thinking of certain project planners seems to go something like this -

" Language issues will somehow take care of themselves- maybe we can get a bit of local training from the British, Germans, Australians or Canadians so investment in language training is not really an issue . As for providing information, this can be dealt with by ordering some books and magazines and putting them into the project director's office. People can consult them there and the Project Director can keep an eye on them at the same time. That way we don't have to worry about staff and the costs of setting up an information centre."

We wish that this was an exaggeration. Unfortunately, we think that we are all familiar with project investment

strategies of this type. There is a failure and a reluctance to address communication as a critical issue. It is critical, and there are too many examples of projects where people cannot get hold of the right kind of information because no-one thought to analyse correctly what their information needs might be, how that information would be sourced, or how they would even understand the information once they obtained it.

Communication is a key factor in project design and investment for the following reasons :

- **Managment information systems** : Effective management information systems are essential for project success. What is the right balance between verbal and written/ printed communication in a project? A lot of management communication is carried out orally. In what language is this being done and what barriers to understanding are being set up through inadequate attention to language ? In terms of printed or electronic MIS systems there is a need to agree the operating language(s) to be used and the systems that will be established for effective internal management communication.

- **Access to information** : All projects need access to information sources of one kind or another. There is a need to define what sort of information sources and materials are required and plan for their effective organisation and exploitation. Are there adequate information materials available in local languages ? If not, is there a need to import foreign materials or to support publishing in local languages ? What access is required to electronic information products either through on-line sources or CD ? What sort of databases need to be built up for use by project staff and recipients ? For example a project with several sites outside the capital may need to consider investing in a shared CD network system in order to maximise access to information amongst project personnel. All these issues have language implications because a realistic analysis will need to be made of what information people require and whether they have the necessary language skills to access the information once it is provided.

- **The global information network** : The Internet has also opened up a whole new world of global

communication so that people working on a tropical forestry project in Thailand or Indonesia for example can now communicate and swap experiences with people working on a similar project in Tanzania or Ecuador. The world of information is however increasingly dominated by the English language and that is a fact that we cannot escape from. It is becoming increasingly difficult for people to be part of the global information community unless they communicate through the medium of English. There is thus a direct inter-relationship between language skills and information access. English has become a global language transcending national cultural boundaries and this issue needs to be addressed when planning for information access. It is a fact that almost 80% of books and journals in scientific, technical and business subjects for example are now published in English. The new electronic medias are increasing this trend. A poor command of English language means that people may not have the language skills to access information that may be important to them; new ideas are not being fed into the project's thinking; opportunities to enhance quality by exposure to the best of international practice and research is lost.

- **Human resource development projects**: HRD projects are one of the fastest growing areas for project investment particularly in the education sector - both formal and non formal- but even in this sector there are no real strategies for addressing the issues of information and language. There is usually an awareness that something needs to be done about improving information access and provision mainly through the delivery mechanism of libraries but investment still lacks focus and strategy. The British Council together with the British Library, International Book Development and the UK's Library Association has formed a research consortium ILIAD - International Library and Information Action for Development - in order to help develop thinking in this area together with aid agencies and governments. Its first major piece of research on guidelines for strategic investment in higher education libraries and information services in the developing world was issued in March 1995. This report states that :

"too often the language element has been overlooked when it comes to dealing with the area

of information in support of academic achievement with the result that foreign books , journals, and electronic information are not adequately exploited with a subsequent negative impact on student performance and the quality of teaching programmes. "

In terms of investment in the language needs of projects, current levels are poor apart from bilaterals (such as ODA and AIDAB.) However, language investment should not remain the preserve of only the bilaterals. It is a fact though that, by and large, language and its critical role in improving access to and participation in the increasingly information driven environment of the late 20th century, is being ignored by the major agencies. This is a matter for considerable concern.

There has been much talk and discussion in the last 10 years about the North -South information gap . This has a lot to do with lack of access by countries in the south to up to date books and journals and a paucity of local publishing. In many countries in the developing world there is an acute shortage of funds which prevents the purchase of books and other information materials or the development of local publishing industries. In countries such as Britain and Germany around 60,000 new titles are published every year in each country. In Indonesia for example it is less than 4,000. With the arrival of electronic information services this gap is set to widen unless attention is given to supporting the development of information content as opposed to information conduit.

Knowledge based development is set to become one of the major issues on the development agenda in the next few years. At the recent FID Centennial conference in Tokyo (October 1994), it was decided to establish a task force which would look at the whole area of knowledge based development and work with international agencies such as the World Bank in creating relevant investment policies for information development in the new electronic era. The issue of electronic based information development is closely linked to language. If information is to be truly accessible on a global scale and ideas and research are to be shared by the international community then developing countries must be helped to participate in these new opportunities. Developing language skills and competencies in major world languages such as Spanish, English , French and German is clearly very important and must be addressed by any one who is investing in knowledge based development. Ignoring the language dimension of the current electronic information revolution will lead in the end to isolation and

marginalisation for those countries trying to be part of the new global information community. Language and information are therefore becoming increasingly important and inter-related. Communication is an increasingly vital element in the both regional and international economies.

We will now move on to looking in more detail at the whole area of verbal communication and the current position in terms of project investment.

3. Language

As noted above language is only language by virtue of its being a carrier of information. Human languages demonstrate tremendous variety in terms of syntax, phonology and orthography but they are all united in being media for the expression of ideas. However, different languages have different histories and their utlity differs accordingly. In consequence, project planners need to take account of the varying utilities of the languages which are available, or potentially available, to those involved in the implementation of a project.

This question of language choice is a well established area of investigation in Education and Human Resource Development projects. In the case of projects whose aim is to develop language skills, the need for this choice to be made very carefully is very obvious.

For instance, if a donor wishes to develop a project intended to improve the foreign language learning of secondary school pupils, the decision as to which language is to be learnt will have to be made at a very early stage. Indeed the choice may have never been openly articulated and it may be assumed that the language to be chosen will be the dominant language of the donor country. However, even in such cases, the implications of choosing to promote, say, English at secondary level, need to be investigated fully if the result of choosing that language, as opposed to any other, are to be fully understood. For instance, English may be the most heavily demanded foreign language in a given country and thus appear to be the natural choice. However, deeper investigation may reveal that there are very ambiguous attitudes to the learning of English. Whilst the learning of English may be very well received in that stratum of the society that has inherited the mantle of the previous colonial elite, the learning of English by the rural poor may be to some extent resented by the poor. This may be because it is seen by the poor as a process whereby existing social divisions will be exacerbated because of the inevitably poor quality of teaching in the rural areas as

opposed to the excellent quality available in good urban schools. Alternatively, it may be argued that for egalitarian reasons English should be taught across the board at primary level when neither trained teachers nor adequate materials are available to teach in the native language. Or there may be other foreign languages which have considerable currency in the country and which the teaching of English may only serve to diminish, to the detriment of those nationals who traditionally secure their position in the society by virtue of their skills in the other languages. Whatever the situation, the donor needs to know in order fully to understand the implications for the project.

Literacy projects also require a very careful consideration of the question of which language or languages would enable the target population to access required information. In the case of speakers of a language which is widely used and which has a developed orthography and literary use, teaching the speakers of such a language to also write and read is a worthy aim for any donor. At the other end of the language spectrum, it may be extremely doubtful whether it is of value to teach people to be literate in a language which is only spoken by a few thousand individuals, for which an orthography must be developed and for which there is no literature or indeed any written material. Between these two extremes lie many languages which, with suitable development, could become a valuable vehicle for the development of literacy or, on the other hand, a suitable substitute for which could be found in the range of second or foreign languages. Indeed, it is the case that donors with every good intention can come up against the wishes of people who see no mileage in becoming literate in their own mother tongue but value more highly the ability to speak and listen in their mother tongue and see greater utility in achieving literacy in another tongue, typically a language inherited from colonialists. Conversely, donors may encounter people who, for reasons of sustaining and developing personal, cultural and national identity wish to become literate in a language which may appear to the donor to be of little value.

The equity issues surrounding the choice of one language as opposed to another should also be considered by project planners. The need for such consideration is very evident in Education and Human Resource Development projects but is just as necessary but perhaps less evident in projects which do not have a specifically educational or HRD orientation. For instance, a project which sets out to achieve civil service reform may well also have to face language choice issues. If a donor wishes to improve the system of social

security benefit administration, it will be necessary to consider in which language or languages to draft regulations and claims forms . A donor needs to be aware that the stream of benefits accruing from such projects can be slanted to or away from certain sectors of the community according to ability to understand the language of regulations and a knowledge of how to fill benefit claim forms. Similarly any attempt to improve the judicial system will have to address the question of which language, or languages, are used in the legal system.

Equity issues are of equal importance in projects aimed at improving economic performance. The history of colonialism is full of examples of certain ethnic groups being used by the colonialists to further their political and trading aims at the expense of the indigenous population. In the post-colonial phase, it is necessary for donors systematically to investigate whether such conditions in the colonial era have created a situation where an improvement in the performance of the national economy will lead to the perpetuation of a situation of inequality, whereby the speakers of a particular language have an unfair advantage in participating in the development of the economy. To be forewarned of these potential problem areas, a donor would be wise to make use of, or to commission research into, the history, current state and post-project situation regarding the linguistic composition of a territory in which it wishes to mount a project. Even countries which are linguistically relatively homogeneous tend to contain enclaves of speakers of other languages. It would be embarrassing to the donor if it was evident that, because of lack of skills in the majority language and thus access to the information sources necessary for successful participation, they were unable to benefit from the project.

It is equally the case that the question of which language to choose for the purposes of project information storage and retrieval is highly pertinent to the planning stage of **all** projects - whether related to Education, Human Resource Development or projects totally outside these sectors. It is by no means enough for a donor to assume that it will be sufficient to carry out some training of local higher level project administrators and technical advisers in the language of the donor country for the purpose of overseas training. The linguistic demands for successful project implementation will probably be much more complex. For instance, in East Africa, it may well be the case that a senior local project manager will have to have adequate skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking to communicate with the donor in his or her native language (-probably a European language-); will need to be able to

communicate nationally in the four language skills with field staff in Swahili with a lesser emphasis on the reading and writing skills, and, will need to be able to speak and listen in one or more vernacular languages with the project end-users. And if we examine the project-related language needs of other project staff, we will come up with a different profile of language needs. It is evident from this that in order to ensure that the project works well it is vital to ensure that all project staff are able to carry out their assigned roles effectively. However, they cannot do this unless they are able to communicate effectively with those with whom the project requires them to communicate and unless they are able to access, through their language skills, the written, oral or electronic sources of information which they require and are able to comprehend, manipulate and disseminate that information in the service of the project.

4.Language and Information Audits and Training Implications

The various questions of language choice which have been elaborated above, in terms of the need to consider the information and related language needs of projects of all kinds, relate to the need to make specific decisions in terms of what information is required by whom and to work out what language skills are required to carry this information. Decisions of this nature cannot be made on an impressionistic basis before the project has begun or on an ad hoc basis when the project is being implemented. Projects succeed or fail on effective communication and it is necessary to adopt a systematic approach to these matters. It has been suggested by the LAP 2000 Conference, held at Lancaster University in 1992, and in related publications, that the best way to proceed is for donors to undertake "Language Audits" at the planning stage of any project in order systematically to establish the language requirements, and consequently, the information needs of the project. The cost of such an Audit need not be great and will only form a very small percentage of the total project budget.

We hope to have shown above that the case for undertaking such an Audit is very strong and that in consequence the financial outlay necessary for such an Audit will yield adequate returns in terms of the proper planning and implementation of projects and in terms of the consequent continuing high reputation of the relevant donor.

Part of the "Language Audit" described and recommended above will inevitably involve a consideration of the language and information training needs of project staff. In the immediate post-colonial era it was assumed that the

repository of needed information and the training necessary to access that information lay almost exclusively in the country of the former coloniser. The location and language of training was therefore never in doubt and trainees were prepared for overseas academic and vocational training by being sent on pre-course overseas language training. In the case of ODA funded training this pattern of UK language training was, with the growth of British Council run Direct Teaching of English Operations, modified and a mix of pre-departure in-country English Language training and UK based pre-course and in-course training was instituted. This latter pattern continues to a large extent today but there are concerns at the high cost of this and at the additional time away from project and/or job that language training causes. Solutions to this concern that are being investigated include increased loading towards in-country as opposed to UK-based language training, increasing the amount of professional or vocational training in the lingua franca in-country and the translation of key project-related source materials into the lingua franca. The extent to which these potential patterns of training have moved away from the original pattern of extensive UK-based English Language training has yet to be seen. However, in the case of the UK bilateral aid programme it is highly likely that all ideas will be exploited which may reduce the extent and cost of language training. Looking to the more distant future, advances in technology, such as Machine Translation of project documents, very wide availability of dedicated narrowcast satellite TV channels in local languages and very cheap local radio stations to disseminate project information, will radically alter the pattern of language training necessary for successful project implementation. But the picture of future language training and information provision that is developing is not yet clear. The new technology will definitely provide the means to provide more and more information in an ever wider range of languages but the concentration of capital into a few largely Anglophone media corporations may skew the picture towards a perhaps surprising need to continue a fairly high level of English Language training. Quite possibly, however, this may be with the aid of new technology and increasingly in-country and by distance means.

An area of concern to donors which relates both to language training and to the means by which project personnel are able to access vital information is the subject area known as Study Skills. In the teaching of English, this is often largely covered by the term "English for Academic Purposes". Study skills and EAP are concerned to ensure that a trainee can understand the organisation of conventional libraries and obtain from them whatever information he or she

requires; can understand the organisation of books of reference especially dictionaries and encyclopaedias; can work out what is and what is not important in an academic lecture or other presentation and take notes accordingly; can read a text at speed to extract the main ideas or to discover a particular piece of information; can use computerised information sources easily and be able to word process, can write reports and make verbal presentations as may be needed for the purposes of project monitoring and the enlightenment and motivation of colleagues etc. etc. The teaching of these skills to project trainees involves both the imparting of the language required and training in concomitant information searching, sifting, assimilating and assembling skills.

It is in Study Skills and EAP that we can see most clearly, in the realm of the training of project staff, the clear relationship between language and information skills. But that relationship is in fact always present. Language is always a carrier of information - without an information load language would not be such but would be noise. And conversely information has to be expressed in a meaningful medium ; this can be in a non-linguistic form as for instance in maps or mathematical symbols but if we think of the contents of a conventional library or the information stored in the electronic media that are forming "libraries without walls" one can see that most information is stored in a verbal medium. Language and information are very much interdependent and a donor cannot consider either in isolation when planning and implementing a project.

5. Discussion Points

This paper hopes to be a stimulus for discussion. The authors would particularly welcome debate regarding :-

- Whether language and information should indeed be regarded as a "cross-cutting" issue
- The role of Language and Information in Literacy Projects
- The impact of current and future high tech. on project-related Language and Information needs
- Future patterns of Language and Information training for project staff
- Ways of convincing donors of the value of Language and Information Audits

- Ways of bringing together more effectively the worlds of Language and Information in project planning and administration

- Views regarding the viability and equity of Language Choice issues raised and their implications for project-related information needs

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